

THE GODDESS

By CHARLES GODDARD and
GOUVERNEUR MORRIS

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SYNOPSIS.

Professor Stilliter, psychologist, and Gordon Barclay, millionaire, plan to preach to the world the gospel of efficiency through a young and beautiful woman who shall believe that she is a heaven-sent messenger. They kidnap the orphaned little Amesbury girl, playmate of Tommy Steele, and conceal her in a cavern, in care of a woman, to be molded to their plan as she grows up. Fifteen years elapse. Tommy is adopted by Barclay, but loses his heirship and on a hunting trip discovers Celestia. Stilliter takes Celestia to New York. Tommy follows, she gets away from both of them, and her real work begins. At Barclay's invitation she meets a dozen of the business leaders who are converted to her new gospel. She attends a ball and makes an impression on the society world. Tommy joins the labor ranks.

NINTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XII.

The Triumvirate and Professor Stilliter were together when Kehr's ciphergram was handed to Barclay, and although they imagined that its contents were important they couldn't help laughing at its wording.

Suckers won't bite. Your muttering carburetor Tommy has tickled Aphrodite. Please pound his whiskers quick.

"Something about this blessed son of mine," said Barclay. He opened a drawer in his writing table and took out a code book, and then with the aid of the others deciphered the message. The plain English of it was this:

Strikers won't fight. Your adopted son Tommy has spoiled our plans. Please call him off quick.

"Well," said Sturtevant, "what will you do?"

"Kehr," said Barclay, "is blood thirstily anxious to teach the strikers a lesson. He being the man on the spot, I have felt obliged to give him a pretty free hand. But I'm glad there has been no blood shed. It seems to me that this is a matter for Her to settle. Stilliter—can you make Her call this strike off and bring about a state of amity in Bitumen?"

Stilliter simply reached for a telegraph blank and wrote:

Kehr, Bitumen, Pa.
Am sending Her,
and signed it Barclay.

"What will you do about Tommy?" he asked. "He'll be even more in the way when Celestia gets there."

After a moment's reflection Barclay wrote a telegram to Tommy:

"Come home at once, must see you on important business."

These telegrams dispatched, Sturtevant and Semmes took their leave, while Barclay and Stilliter sat on for a time in silence. Barclay was the first to break it.

"You will have no trouble in persuading her to go?"

"She dislikes me, but she does what I tell her—only I don't tell her. I don't understand her aversion to me. She knows that I am with her heart and soul for the common good. And she is willing to work with me. But I repel her."

Barclay smiled grimly.

"You have never made any great effort to please the ladies," he said.

"A mistake of youth of which I begin to repent in middle age. I have made the mistake of imagining that I could live and die an abstract intellect. It's my eyes I suppose. They made me hypersensitive."

"But you weren't born with weak eyes."

"No—when I was at college a retort burnt in my face. I had splendid eyes as a child. Nobody ever had a better physical equipment than I had—a stronger body or a stronger brain. I am the kind of man who ought to marry and have children."

Both were silent again. Then Stilliter said:

"I've been giving the matter more and more thought. It seems to me a sort of duty."

Stilliter sat gazing off into space through the thick lenses which gave him sight, and Barclay, a troubled smile on his lips, sat and watched Stilliter's face.

"You must have someone in mind," he suggested presently.

Stilliter gave a kind of guilty start.

"And suppose I have?"

The smile faded slowly from Barclay's mouth.

"I do suppose that you have," he said sternly. "but don't tell me that our plans are to be wrecked because you have turned amorous in your middle age."

"I thought," said Stilliter, "that I had myself in absolute control."

"This is frightful!" said Barclay, simply.

"Oh, don't worry," said Stilliter; "the great work shall be accomplished first. But it seems only right to tell you what my intentions are—after the work is finished. Has anyone so great a claim on Her as I?"

"You repel her. You have said it."

"I have willed her to like me. It is the one thing I cannot successfully will her to do. . . . I'm just saying what my ultimate intentions are."

"Don't you think," said Barclay, "that when her work is done, the poor child ought to be turned free to live—to love and to be happy?"

"I do not," exclaimed Stilliter, "for the good of the human race, I do not."

He rose and started slowly for the door.

"Wait a minute," said Barclay, and he interposed himself between Stilliter and the door; "have I your word of honor that you will attempt nothing against her, that she will be safe with you until her work is done?"

"You have my word of honor," said Stilliter, but the dog did not look his master in the eye.

CHAPTER XIII.

Meanwhile, Tommy had been invited to live with the Gundsorfs, and had carried his belongings to their house.

As leader of the discontented, Gundsorf ran an open house. There was always talk and something to drink in the front room downstairs. Here, policies were hatched just as they are in the cabinet room in Washington, and here drinks of the most vile rye whisky could be had by the initiated for the asking.

From the very first Mrs. Gundsorf had done her best to make Tommy comfortable. Not a tidy woman by nature, she put her house in order for his benefit and kept it so. From the looking glass in the kitchen at which you combed your hair before meals, she scrubbed the fly-specks. She bought a new comb with a full complement of teeth to hang on the chain, she washed the roller towel, and for the first time in her life took an interest in cooking, seeking instruction from neighbors who had reputations in that line. But she managed for a time to confine her amorous feelings toward Tommy to deeds and attentions. She tried to make her manner toward him just what it was to other young men who came to the house. But when discussion was hot in the front room, and the whisky was going, and nobody was noticing her, she feasted her eyes on his brown face and her ears on his quiet, resonant well-bred voice.

All the time her mind was filled with thoughts and visions of Tommy. Sometimes she would take his coat from its hook and strain it to her breast. Sometimes when he was out of the house she would go to his room and sit by the hour, feasting herself on day-dreams of him.

In her mind at least, she was already faithful to her husband. But this did not trouble her in the least.

One day there was a violent socialistic discussion going on in the front room. Mrs. Gundsorf had appeared twice at the hall door to listen, and gaze surreptitiously at Tommy and had twice vanished upon some household duty or other.

Having closed the door softly, she turned swiftly to where Tommy's coat hung, and pressed it passionately to her cheek, a paper rustled in the breast pocket, where she knew no paper had been earlier in the day, and after a moment's hesitation, and impelled by a sudden unreasoning jealousy, she snatched it out of the pocket and examined it.

Thomas Barclay, Bitumen, Pa.

Come home at once, must see you on important business.

Barclay.

Mrs. Gundsorf felt as if she had been struck a heavy blow between the eyes. Was her godlike champion of labor only a hypocrite and a spy? For a moment it seemed as if her knees had turned to water. She put the telegram back in its pocket, and having pulled herself together, once more entered the front room.

It was five o'clock when the sitting broke up with everyone except Gundsorf and Tommy (who drank nothing) the worse for liquor.

Gundsorf had business elsewhere, and he hustled his guests out of the house, feeling rightly that they were sufficiently primed for the time being.

Tommy and Mrs. Gundsorf remained seated, side by side. Mrs. Gundsorf reached for the whisky bottle and Tommy laid his hand on her arm and said: "Don't; what's the use?"

"I'm sick," she said in a thick voice; her arm trembled under his hand.

"That stuff won't help any. I'll go for the doctor."

"I'll be all right. I'm faint, that's all."

To Tommy she seemed to be making an effort to pull together.

"It's the air in this room," he said.

"Let me take you outside."

She seemed to acquiesce, and he helped her to her feet, and toward the door, his left arm around her waist. She leaned more and more heavily against him, until it took real strength to keep her from falling. In the front hall she appeared to collapse entirely.

Her head dropped backward as if her neck had been suddenly dislocated, and she lurched against Tommy with all her weight.

It was necessary, he felt, to go for the doctor at once, but he could not leave her lying in the front hall. So, not without difficulty, for the stair was very narrow, he carried her up to the

room which she shared with her husband, and laid her on the bed.

Then he was for leaving her, but she had flung her arms about his neck, and was holding him tight. Her eyes had opened and shone brilliantly in his face. Her cheeks and temples were crimson, and there was no longer any fear of him in her, or shame.

For a moment, so innocent was Tommy, he thought that her sudden fainting sickness had culminated in a sort of fit, and it was not until he felt that her lips were greedily seeking his that he realized his position.

He shook himself free, not gently, and without a word, turned and marched out of the room, and down the stair. He took his coat from its hook and put it on, laid his hand on the knob of the front door, hesitated, turned on his heel and went back up the stair. He had closed the door of Mrs. Gundsorf's room behind him. Now he knocked on it, and in a stern voice, for youth and innocence are very stern, said: "Mrs. Gundsorf."

There was no answer. He raised his voice a trifle.

"Do you need the doctor, or don't you?"

This time she answered him:

"I don't need any doctor, and you can go to hell."

Tommy shrugged his shoulders, went to his own room, bolted the door and prepared to read till supper time. But he couldn't read. The new problem which had suddenly risen in his life was too disturbing.

Presently he heard Mrs. Gundsorf stirring in her room. She came out, and stopped in front of his door.

"Are you in there?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm thinking."

"Are you going to tell on me?"

"No. I'm not going to do that. But I must find some other place to live."

Silence. Then Mrs. Gundsorf:

"Please don't. . . . Won't you open the door? We can talk better."

It seemed such a confession of cowardice not to open the door, that Tommy opened it, and they faced each other across the threshold.

"It was the liquor," she said. "I'm like that when I drink. If you won't go away, I won't drink any more."

Her hair was disheveled and she had been crying.

"If Gundsorf found out why you went away, he'd skin me alive. I won't trouble you any more."

She looked very frightened and pathetic.

"Then you'd better fix yourself up," said Tommy. "You look as if—well"

and went back to her own room. But she had no sooner passed the threshold than she turned and exclaimed:

"For God's sake, come quick, the house is on fire."

Tommy darted after her, and perceived that the alcohol lamp with which she heated her curling tongs had run over and set fire to some papers in a scrap basket. It was the work of a few seconds to subdue this incipient conflagration with water from Mrs. Gundsorf's wash pitcher, and when he had reduced the paper to a wet blackened mass, and blown out the alcohol lamp, he turned, and found Mrs. Gundsorf laughing at him.

"I don't know why you are laughing," he said coldly; "it might have been serious."

She was between him and the door, but she stepped aside and let him pass.

"What's the matter with this door?" he asked, after a fruitless effort to open it.

"It's locked."

"Why?"

"Because we've got to have our talk out. And I don't want you running away from it."

"Do be reasonable, Mrs. Gundsorf. Let me have the key. This won't do at all, you know. Where is the key?"

She smiled at him, half closed her eyes, and held up her hands high above her head, as people do at the command of a highwayman.

"If you won't give me the key, I shall have to break the door down."

"Yes, and I'll say you broke it down. But not from inside out. I'll say you broke it down from outside in."

"You had better give me that key," said Tommy.

She smiled inscrutably, for she had hidden the key in a very safe place. It was at the moment of her own right-hand pocket of Tommy's own jacket, into which she had dropped it, while he was busy putting the fire out.

"Did you ever hear that a woman scorned was more dangerous than a loaded gun?" she asked. And added sweetly: "Gundsorf ought to be getting back."

"I hope so," said Tommy. "I shall feel obliged to tell him the whole story."

Mrs. Gundsorf laughed out loud.

"You're too good to be true," she added. "You blessed innocent!"

"We shall see," said Tommy. He started toward the window and stood looking out.

"Your husband is coming home now," he said; "hadn't you better let

me out? You've only a moment to make up your mind."

They heard the sound of the front door being opened and slammed shut; and then voices in the hall.

"Promise to be my feller," whispered Mrs. Gundsorf, "and I let you out."

It was not easy for her to face the scorn in Tommy's eyes. For a moment she met his gaze, and then her eyes fell before it, and began to glance stealthily this way and that.

"Don't ruin yourself," said Tommy; "think this thing over. Let me go now. Tomorrow if you still wish to make a row I will come back, you can lock the door. Everything will be as it is now. But for your own sake don't do anything in a hurry. Take 24 hours to think it over. Perhaps what seems good enough today, won't seem good enough tomorrow."

Her answer was a piercing scream for help. Repeating this scream again and again she began to storm about the room, overturning a chair and the washstand. Then, with an insane swiftness for which he was ill-prepared, she flung herself upon Tommy, struck him a heavy blow on the mouth, rumbled his hair, and then flung her arms round his neck and half strangled him. All the while her screams for help pierced through the walls of the house.

Tommy was in a position at once ridiculous and terrible. He strove to free himself without hurting the woman. Then came a rush of heavy feet up the stair, and the bedroom door was carried inward clean off its

hinges, and through the opening came Gundsorf. Rage had transformed him into a beast. It was fortunate that he was unarmed.

To him it must have appeared as if his wife had just torn herself free from Tommy. At the threshold of the room stood Gundsorf's three friends, at once menacing and abashed.

"What is it?" thundered Gundsorf.

"He was hiding behind the door," she said; "when I'd passed into the room, he slammed it shut and went for me."

"Is this true?" Gundsorf faced him and advanced toward him, with clenched hands.

"She'll tell you next," said Tommy, "that I locked the door and put the key in my pocket."

He spoke with so much scorn and assurance that Gundsorf hesitated, and turned toward his wife.

"It's just what he did do," she said; "he locked the door and put the key in his pocket."

Tommy's hands dropped into the pocket of his jacket, and his right hand closed upon the door key. He did not need to speak. His face told the story. Slowly he withdrew the key from his pocket and tossed it on to the thread-bare carpet.

"This looks bad, Gundsorf," he said; "but if you'll listen to me . . ."

"I will listen to you in hell," said Gundsorf. "Take him, boys."

Gundsorf's three friends came slowly forward.

"They're going to kill me if they can," thought Tommy; "and I don't want to be killed."

He drew a long breath and clenched his fists.

"Don't kill him," cried Mrs. Gundsorf suddenly, "not yet!"

"Why not yet," growled Gundsorf.

"Because, you fool, if you kill him here—in my room—people will think—"

"What will they think?"

"They will think—oh don't make me say it."

Gundsorf began to scratch the back of his head.

"That is true," he said presently.

"We had better take him away somewhere. For now we will tie him. When it is dark we will take him away somewhere in a carriage. We will take with us also a stick of dynamite. A stick of dynamite with a lighted fuse makes a fine gag to go in a man's mouth. It keeps him quiet forever."

"You don't need to take him away," said Mrs. Gundsorf; "there's a fine strong elm tree in front of the house. Take him downstairs, call in the boys, and read them the telegram he's got in his inside pocket. Nobody need mention me—and the boys'll do the rest. . . . The dirty spy!"

Gundsorf and his three friends closed in upon Tommy from three sides. Mrs. Gundsorf crept stealthily along the wall to take him in the rear.

"Gundsorf," said Tommy suddenly, "just read that telegram. You can't hang a man on that. It's from the man who adopted me and brought me up. We differed because I am on the side of labor. He says he wants to see me on important business. That doesn't make me a spy, does it? Be reasonable."

Ordinarily, for Gundsorf had an intelligent mind, he would have placed a just value upon the telegram as evidence against Tommy. Just now his reason was blinded by jealous rage.

At that moment, seeing that the affair had passed beyond reason and debate, Tommy stepped quickly forward and lifted Gundsorf clean from the floor with a terrific right hand blow under the point of the chin.

Swift as lightning he turned and struck the nearest of Gundsorf's friends between the eyes. This cleared the way to the door, and he sprang toward it, but only to fall heavily on his face, for Mrs. Gundsorf had grappled him from behind about the ankles.

A minute later they had overpowered and tied him hand and foot.

Fifteen minutes later Tommy stood on the top of a stepladder, surrounded by an enraged mob of men and women who showered vile epithets upon him.

Tommy was not frightened. He was dazed from rough handling, and somehow he couldn't believe that they really meant to hurt him. It was merely an unpleasant dream from which he would presently waken safe in bed.

It was only very gradually that the truth dawned on him, and a great lump rose in his throat and pressed against the rope which encircled it. Yes. They were going to kill him. He would never see Celestia again. He began to think of her, intentionally with all his will.

Presently she seemed to be directly beneath him, looking up into his face. He smiled at her. He couldn't help it. Then she turned her back to him, her face to the others, and she spoke in a gallant loud voice:

"What has he done?"

A shiver went up and down Tommy's spine. In the name of all that was miraculous that hallucination in white with the gallant voice was really Celestia. Yes. And there, hanging back in the crowd was Professor Stilliter with his thick glasses, and Freddie the Ferret, Freddie brandishing that big automatic which his father had forbidden him to carry. Celestia was answered with cries from here and there:

"He's a traitor, a spy! He was going to betray us!"

Gundsorf crept toward her, holding in his outstretched hand the fateful telegram.

"We found it on him," he said.

Celestia read the telegram and flung it angrily from her.

"Is that your evidence?"

Gundsorf shrank from her. She stepped toward him and he had to look her in the eyes.

"Do you believe that he is a spy?"

Gundsorf's chin dropped upon his breast and he began to shake his head slowly from side to side. The crowd began to murmur with astonishment.

"Then why did you accuse him?"

"I—he," mumbled Gundsorf.

"Why in the name of justice?"

"He—he is a ravisher."

"A what?"

"He attacked a defenseless woman. It was to shield her reputation that I

attacked her."

"That I locked the door and put the key in my pocket."

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